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CONNECTICUT
STATE COUNCIL

SERVICE EMPLOYEES
INTERNATIONAL UNION
CTW, CLC

Statement by Paul Filson, Director of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Connecticut State Council in opposition to HB 5366, SB 1109, and SB 604 -- Various acts that would reduce grants to qualified candidates under the Citizens' Election Program-- before the GAE Committee

Good morning, Co-Chairs, Senator Slossberg, Representative Spalone and distinguished members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee - I appreciate the opportunity to be here before you today. My name is Paul Filson and I am Director of SEIU's Connecticut State Council. The State Council represents over 55,000 active members in Connecticut. SEIU is Connecticut's largest union. We represent health care workers, building service workers, state/municipal employees and community college professors and staff. The SEIU State Council whole-heartedly supports public funding of elections and recommends that the General Assembly continue to fully fund the Citizens' Election Program.

SEIU opposes three bills **HB 5366, SB 1109, and SB 604** that propose to reduce grants to qualified candidates for office. In general, the Citizens' Election Program has been a success. Following the scandals of the Rowland administration Connecticut became a pioneer in taking the corrupting influence of private money out of the system. The 2008 cycle of elections was a success with 75% of all candidates participating in the program. Many candidates that I spoke with last year told me that they would not have run were it not for the program that provided enough money to run competitive campaigns against incumbents. There were also several competitive primaries that would not have been possible without public money.

Most incumbent candidates who I spoke with also told me how refreshing it was to have a system that relied not on raising money from PACs and lobbyists, but rather on small contributions from constituents. The beauty of the Citizens' Election Program is that it takes the corrupting influence of special interest money out of the equation for elections. Post election, our representatives do not have to worry about whether or not they can raise easy money from lobbyists and PACs by voting for laws that might offend special interests and thus cut off the flow of money.

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Running an effective campaign these days is not an inexpensive proposition. In addition to pounding the pavement and pressing the flesh, which are free, communicating with voters through mail and radio and even TV is getting more and more expensive. Postage fees are rising yearly and printing costs go up every year. Running an effective campaign depends on getting your message out to voters. Reducing the grants, as proposed in the above bills, will encourage more and more candidates to choose to run campaigns with private money, cycling Connecticut back towards the system it recently chose to scrap due to corruption.

A vibrant democracy depends on an electoral system that is fair and balanced. It depends on competitive campaigns. It will be way more dynamic if anyone who wants to run is able to run – even people of modest means. The old system favored candidates with money and connections.

Finally, under the old system, one phone call to a lobbyist could generate thousands of dollars in contributions. I used to get those calls. SEIU and its various locals with PACs could donate much more money than say a small business owner or your neighbor down the street. Even worse, a call to a well connected contract lobbyist could raise nearly every dime you might need to run your campaign. I used to attend fund raisers at restaurants where a dozen people would attend, but several dozen checks would appear on the table along with a thick ad book filled with ads from lobbyists and lobbyist clients. That kind of money may have been able to buy more consideration than is proper.

Let's not start reducing the effectiveness of the Citizens' Election Program even before it has run through an entire election cycle. In 2010 we have elections for Governor and constitutional officers as well as the second time around for State Representatives and State Senators. It's imperative that these elections are publicly funded with enough money to be effective.